

Katrin Hallik

Creating a clear language strategy in Estonia

With a population of only 1.4 million, Estonia has progressed quickly in the field of IT over the last two decades. We are eager to use IT solutions that create a good basis for innovative and user-friendly public services. Developments in both e-governance and general welfare have brought about a natural need for improved social services, including the development of clear language. We might say that clear language starts to develop in a new society once its basic needs have been met.

Probably it is also inevitable that administrative and legal writing is still decades behind user-based efficient information design. This is why the goal behind promoting clear language in Estonia is mainly to foster the development of clear language traditions in legal and administrative documents.

The Estonian model of creating a clear language strategy can be described as work on two levels: the horizontal level, which involves drawing up a concept of clear language, fostering awareness across all strata of society and creating a clear language community; and the vertical level, which includes constant lobbying among lawyers, finding support among politicians and civil servants, reaching out to legislators and strategy builders, all with the aim of introducing the concept of clear language in strategic documents.

So far the initiative has been taken by the Institute of the Estonian Language, although in the last ten years several government departments have launched their own clear language projects and are creating their own strategies in cooperation with the Institute of the Estonian Language.

Our model of clear language is composed of the following steps, expressed by the acronym CLEAR:

- Community building,
- Lobbying,
- Endorsement,
- Awareness building,
- Realisation.

1. Community building

In order to create a community, it is necessary to look for people with a similar mindset. For this purpose, we have organised regular seminars and conferences, created a website and set up a Facebook community. For six years we have run a Clear Communication Award Contest. We invite both public and private com-

panies as well as private individuals to submit good examples of clear public communication; as a result we have gathered a valuable collection of clear language practices. The award has grown in popularity: in six years we have had 484 entries for the award, with public administrations submitting several projects every year. The award has become a quality mark that organisations add to their documents and websites.

In 2019 we ran the first Estonian Gobbledygook Campaign, asking people to send us examples of bureaucratic jargon. The campaign was welcomed and we received many wonderful examples of gobbledygook together with clear language versions.

2. Lobbying

Lobbying among lawyers and civil servants has been an essential tool for promoting clear language. For three years we have been organising Think Tanks, creating cooperation networks and promoting individual projects. The cooperation network includes the Tax and Customs Board, Rescue Board, Emergency Response Centre, National Audit Office, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education and Research, Estonian Cooperation Assembly and others.

In November 2019 we held a special Think Tank called the “Clear and User-Centred State” where representatives of public administrations participated in a five-hour brainstorming session on the strategy of clear language. Among the speakers were the Estonian Chancellor of Justice, Ülle Madise, the National Digital Advisor, Marten Kaevats, Media and Communication Expert Lee Maripuu, Brand and Design Strategist Tajo Oja and Information Designer Janno Siimar. Valuable ideas of how to make things happen were shared and transferred to the daily practices of public administrations.

3. Endorsement

Endorsement at a high level has facilitated the development of clear language in Estonia in many ways. The main endorsers so far have been two Speakers of the Estonian Parliament and also the current Chancellor of Justice, Ülle Madise.

The President of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid, sent an audio greeting to our “Clear and User-Centred State” Think Tank, stressing the practical and simple benefits of clear language.

4. Awareness building

The first ten years of clear language development in Estonia have mainly been dedicated to awareness building, preparing the ground for concrete steps to be

taken. The concept of clear language as we know it today did not exist in Estonia ten years ago. Now, support for clear language has been officially established in the Estonian Language Development Plan 2018–2027. Clear language has been stated as one of the main requirements in the Guidelines for Legislative Policy until 2030. We are still a few steps away from creating an official strategy plan for Estonia.

Awareness building has meant a lot of training for organisations, both public and private.

Awareness building also means lending credibility to clear language: in 2019 we carried out the first Estonian clear language survey involving the following administrations: the Emergency Response Centre, Health Insurance Fund, Rescue Board, Chancellor of Justice, Social Insurance Board, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Finance and the Unemployment Insurance Fund.

The survey revealed the main obstacles to clear language usage in public administration:

Organisational level:

- a management style of using legalese,
- an organisational culture that sustains hierarchy and strict standards for documents.

Attitudes and skills level:

- a lack of skill and information about clear language,
- a fear of making mistakes and taking personal responsibility,
- a belief that officialise provides protection in court,
- a general lack of user-centred design.

Language level:

- legalese spreading from official documents into all forms of communication with citizens.

Solutions given by the officials in the survey included the following:

Organisational level:

- feedback systems that facilitate follow-up on the personal progress of officials,
- random monitoring of response emails, thus helping to maintain quality,
- a rotation of officials to promote the sharing of ideas and experience.

Attitudes and skills level:

- training programmes that facilitate change on different levels of the organisation and help sustain progress,
- institutionalised change: best practices that become the general policy of the organisation concerned,
- online sample forms that can be used in order to create clear documents.

Language level:

- change in the linguistic attitudes of experts,
- clear language consultants in public administration who assist in creating a new culture of communication,
- efficient teams of linguists, designers and marketing specialists.

The participants stressed that it all starts at management level: it is vital to have the top level interested in sustaining progress in the use of clear language.

5. Realisation

Clarity comes from caring, as the clear language advocates say.

Once a society has managed to take care of the basic needs of people, it can start paying more attention to humanistic values like user-friendliness, equality and caring for others. Estonia has a good potential for IT networks, language planning and high-quality design that could foster rapid success in clear language.

